

Name \_\_\_\_\_

## US History

### Torment with Tar and Feathers in Early America

Tarring and feathering will always be associated with the days leading to the American Revolution as a cruel tool for intimidation.

The practice of tarring and feathering was employed by opponents of British authority in America to intimidate and humiliate their enemies. Mobs that carried it out would seize the victim, daub tar on him, and then toss feathers over him. Frequently, such mobs would also load the victim on a cart and pull him through the town for everyone to see.

The victim suffered pain and humiliation, but deaths were rare. In at least one case, members of a mob about to tar and feather a man were talked into abandoning the plan out of concern the man might not survive the ordeal.



## **Pine Tar and Goose Feathers**

Tar and feathers were both quite readily available in port towns. Pine tar was widely used around harbors to make ships, sails, and rigging waterproof. Goose feathers were used to stuff pillows, mattresses, and cushions.

Many assumed at the time that tarring and feathering was invented in colonial America. That, however, was not the case. Tarring and feathering occurred as far back as medieval times.

Americans probably learned of tarring and feathering by way of sailors who frequented Atlantic ports.

## **British Crackdown on Smuggling**

Perhaps the first incident of tarring and feathering in connection with the colonists' quarrels with Britain occurred in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1768. At the time, British authorities were imposing new duties on goods imported into the colonies and cracking down on smuggling to evade those duties. To punish a man who allegedly informed authorities about a smuggled cargo of molasses, a crowd in Salem "stripped him, then wrapped him in a Tarred Sheet, and rolled him in Feathers; having done this, they carried him about the Streets in a Cart, and then banished him from the town for 6 weeks."

News of that incident spread down the coast. Soon, groups that shared the same hatred for such informers seized upon the method of intimidation.

Victims were often partly or completely stripped. If the tar applied was hot, the victim's skin would blister. But few reports indicate that the tar was heated before being applied. Also, in some cases, the tar was painted on over the victim's clothes. Sometimes the victim was even permitted to wear a sheet or frock to protect his clothes. Hot or not, tar applied directly to the skin and allowed to dry would be difficult to get off. Sometimes, strips of skin would come off in the process of removing the tar.

The feathers from two pillows were about enough to cover a victim. In one incident, a feather mattress was cut open and dumped on a victim. In another case, members of a crowd repeatedly hurled a goose at their victim. In still another incident the feathers on the victim were set on fire.

## **Five-Hour Ordeal in Boston**

In one of the cruelest tar-and-feather incidents, a man in Boston had his arm dislocated as he was stripped naked on one of the coldest nights of the year. Then over the course of five hours, he was not only tarred and feathered, but also carried through the town on a cart, beaten with clubs, whipped, forced to stand at the town gallows with a rope around his neck, and then forced to drink tea until he vomited.

In Charleston, South Carolina, one tarring and feathering apparently ended with a lynching. A mob there seized a minister suspected of being an enemy. After tarring and feathering the man, they erected a gibbet, and then hanged the man.

Sometimes, crowds applied tar and feathers to houses of those who violated patriotic demands. On one occasion, a merchant found his horse tarred and feathered. In Monmouth County, New Jersey, a pamphlet critical of the Continental Congress was given a “suit of tar and turkey-buzzard's feathers” and nailed to a pillory post.

People on the other side of the quarrel also employed the tactic. British soldiers, annoyed with constant harassment on the eve of the war, tarred and feathered a Massachusetts man who illegally attempted to buy a gun from a soldier. They also forced him to wear a placard that read "American Liberty: a Speciment of Democracy" and carted him around to the tune of Yankee Doodle.

Records indicate that crowds of patriotic women also applied tar and feathers. In Stamford, Connecticut, women got word that a local mother had named her newborn after a former British commander. About 170 women gathered, marched to the mother's house, and presented the mother “with a suit of tar and feathers.”

### **For Speaking Against Continental Congress**

According to a contemporary newspaper report, women in Kinderhook, New York, who had gathered for a quilting bee, “tarred and feathered” a man for speaking against the Continental Congress. The “tar” they used was molasses. The “feathers” were the “downy tops of flags”—probably cattails—from a nearby meadow.

The practice of tarring and feathering continued long after the American Revolution and at least until 1835 when a man in Vicksburg, Mississippi, was tarred and feathered for disrupting a barbecue on the Fourth of July.

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